

SOCIAL COGNITION (Part 10)

**Emellia Fahariah Binti Jamaludin, Farahiyah Binti Mohamad Zuki , Pazarina Binti Musa,
Nazimah Binti Mohamad@Mohd Noor & Nor `Akmar Binti Yunus**

What Might Have Been: The Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking

Often people evaluate their experiences by thinking about how events might have turned out differently. Sometimes they think about how things might have been worse, and they feel good. At other times they think about how things might have been better, and they feel bad. Thinking about “what might have been” is called counterfactual thinking (Miller, Thurnbull, and McFarland, 1990). In one early study of this phenomenon, subjects were asked to think of missing a scheduled airplane flight by five minutes or thirty minutes. Which situation would make you feel worse? The results show that missing a flight by five creates more distress (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). It is easier in the case to do counterfactual thinking about little things that might have been changed to arrive at the gate on time. When people think of how things could easily have been better, they feel distinctly worse.

An interesting field study of counterfactual thinking looked at silver and bronze medal winners at the winter Olympics. The first part of the study analyzed videotapes of these athletes at two times: When the outcomes of their events were announced and when they received their medals on the reviewing stand. Subject ratings of an athlete’s happiness were higher for bronze medal winners than silver middle winners. The second part of the study analyzed network interview and found that silver medal winners had counterfactual thoughts about how they might have won.

They tended to think about almost finishing first and how they might have done things differently to win the gold medal. They felt bad about just missing. In contrast, bronze medal winners had counterfactual thoughts about how they almost missed winning a medal altogether. They were glad to walk away with something (Medvec, Madey, and Gilovich, 1995). Again when people think about better alternatives to their experiences, they feel bad. When the alternatives they imagine are worse, they feel good (Markman, Gavanski, Sherman & McMullen, 1995).

Recent laboraty studies suggest that people are likely to think of how things might have been better after failure and how they might have been worse after success. (Olson and

Roese, 1995). Thinking about how things might have been better after failure makes people feel bad, but it may well be functional. If people can be led to think about how they might handle future situations differently, they can play behavior that will increase the probability of success and will experience less negative affect (Boninger, Gleicher, and Strathman, 1994; Rose, 1994).

Counterfactual thinking has also been studied among people who have experienced wrenching real-life tragedies. For example, when people who have accidents that lead to spinal cord injuries and paralysis, they often think about how the accident might have been avoided. The more they think about these positive counterfactuals, the more they blame themselves for the accidents (David, Lehman, Silver, Wortman, and Ellard, 1996). Similarly, people who have lost a spouse or a child in an automobile accident, or a baby to sudden infant death syndrome, often think about ways that things might have turned out differently. Specifically, they engage in “undoing” thoughts, thoughts about how they might have changed the outcome. When people think of things that they could have done to “undo” the tragedy, they feel that they should have done them. Even though undoing thoughts cause great distress, they may give people some sense of control over life events.